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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8633
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ISTANBUL 000601

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2028

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SUBJECT: IRAN/ETHNIC GROUPS: AN ETHNIC RIGHTS ACTIVIST
DESCRIBES THE "AZERI ETHNIC MOVEMENT" IN IRAN

Classified By: Acting Pol/Econ section chief Geoff Odlum; Reason 1.5 (d
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11. (S) Summary: An Iranian-Azeri journalist told us November 29 that the June 2006 ethnic Azeri demonstrations against authorities in northwest Iran were "an awakening" for the Azeri ethnic movement and led the regime to conclude it was a threat to stability. He described a diffuse ethnic movement, with different groups pursuing a spectrum of goals from simply enjoying more cultural and linguistic rights, to equal status for the Azeri language, to political autonomy, to independence. Although "organically linked," he said the groups sometimes work together and sometimes do not. He said the general consensus is to focus on cultural and linguistic freedom, deferring political goals to the longer-term. He claimed growing contacts between ethnic Azeri and Ahwaz Arab groups in Iran, and growing tensions with Iran's Kurds. He described differing approaches to his movement from the IRGC and MOIS, believing the MOIS protected him from the IRGC while he was in jail. He asked for USG views about the ethnic Azeri movement, warned the USG not to use the Azeri movement as a tool simply to raise pressure on Iran, and urged the USG to issue more careful statements of support for ethnic Iranian Azeri desires to enjoy freely their own language and culture. End Summary.

12. (S) On the margins of an Iran human rights conference in Istanbul (septel), ConGen Istanbul's NEA "Iran Watcher" met discreetly with Ali Hamed Iman (strictly protect), an Iranian-Azeri journalist and activist. Iman was only willing to meet off the premises of the conference, in the company of an intermediary. He felt under constant scrutiny from Iranian security services, which he said were aware of his travel to Istanbul and possibly surveilling him. Iman was formerly the editor of a leading Tabriz-based newspaper, "Tabrik Shams", which the GOI shut down in summer 2006 following widespread protests in northwest Iran in reaction to the May 2006 publication in a Tehran daily of a derogatory cartoon of a cockroach representing an Iranian-Azeri. Iman had written an editorial criticizing the GOI's slow reaction to condemning that caricature, which led security forces to arrest and jail him in June 2006. He was freed after several months but his paper was permanently shut down and he received a lifetime ban against publishing in Iran. He still lives in Tabriz, and now publishes "AzerTurk", a monthly magazine focusing on Iranian-Azeri literature and culture (www.azarturk.com), which is published in Canada. He is trying to start up a tourism-oriented organization that will encourage Iranian-Azeri expatriates to travel back to northwest Iran for cultural and familial visits and raise international awareness of Iranian-Azeri culture. Iman was nervous meeting with us, but he explained that the risk was worth the benefit of being able to convey to the USG the challenges the Iranian-Azeri "movement" is facing and of hearing USG views about ethnic Azeri activism inside Iran.

13. (C) Iman characterized the Azeri population in northwest Iran as facing similar economic and political challenges as other Iranians, while additionally feeling a sense of suspended momentum in the population's efforts to highlight to the regime their particular cultural and linguistic grievances. He characterized the May-June 2006 demonstrations as "an awakening" for the Iranian-Azeri movement, which he said "surprised and even frightened both the regime and us" by showing just how widely and deeply in the region the sense of Azeri ethnicity was felt, and by showing regime leaders the power that Azeri ethnic identity has in bringing Iranians to the streets. "It was good news and bad news for us, because it showed the world that we are a legitimate ethnic movement, but it also convinced the regime that it needed to treat us as a threat to stability." Following the demonstrations the regime jailed hundreds of ethnic Azeri leaders and activists, including Iman, and did so again in February 2007 following a second round of smaller but still widespread demonstrations. As a "precaution," the regime again detained known ethnic Azeri leaders in May 2007 and May 2008, to prevent them from leading commemorative demonstrations.

"The MOIS protected me from the IRGC"

14. (C) Iman described a GOI that reflexively sees any ethnic movement inside Iran as a threat against the system, a perspective shared even by regime leaders who themselves are

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of Azeri ethnicity like Supreme Leader Khamenei, IRGC Commander Safavi, and several other current GOI Ministers. The regime recognizes that Iranian Azeris generally were strong supporters of the Islamic Revolution and of Ayatollah Khomeini, and are well integrated into Iranian daily life. Some regime leaders, according to Iman, remain "quietly sympathetic" to the desire of Iranian-Azeris to enjoy freely their own language and culture, but "as long as Iran is under threat of a regime change" even sympathetic regime officials are afraid to allow any freedom. Some are afraid that giving freedom of linguistic expression will lead down a slippery slope of further social or political demands. Other regime officials do not want to open the door "even a crack" to allow Turkey any more influence in northwest Iran. "The result is a policy of oppression, the easiest policy response for the regime to make."

15. (S) But even in pursuing oppressive tactics against the Iranian-Azeris, Iman acknowledged, there are nuanced differences in the way different regime elements operate. He identified a half-dozen regime security organizations -- IRGC, MOIS, Ministry of Interior forces, Judiciary police, local and provincial police, and Basiji among them -- that are involved in monitoring, harassing, and arresting Iranian Azeri activists. He said the IRGC is by far the toughest. Iman was arrested in June 2006 by local police who handed him over to the MOIS "because they didn't want the IRGC to get its hands on me and kill me." He said the MOIS focused its questions on the Azeri ethnic movement's leadership and motives, and seemed most interested in confirming that the Azeri movement's aims were not regime overthrow or regional secession. He believes (or was led by his MOIS interrogators to believe) that the MOIS was resisting intense pressure from above to turn him over to the IRGC. Iman believes the MOIS protected him from certain IRGC torture. The MOIS, however, has continued to make clear its redlines to Iman, the overstepping of which would lead to renewed detention. "Every time I return from travel abroad, they ask me to meet with them at a hotel in Tabriz and explain what I did on my trip. As long as I have only been attending academic conferences or doing work with my magazine, they don't detain me. So far."

Our movement has a spectrum of goals

¶16. (C) Asked whether the ethnic Iranian Azeri movement was unified or diffuse, Iman said the overall movement "is not one voice or one leader at the moment." He described a broad, "free-flowing" and flexible ethnic movement, rather than a rigid pyramid structure or formal political party. He said most of the "30 million" ethnic Azeris in Iran (comment: the 2008 CIA World Factbook indicates an Azeri population of around 16 million, i.e. 24% of the estimated 2008 Iranian population of 68.9 million inhabitants), simply want to exercise the right to use and enjoy the Azeri language and culture freely, including receiving a university-level education in Azeri. Smaller groups are actively pushing for more formalized cultural and linguistic equality, for example by making Azeri an official language of Iran. Some groups within the movement are more political, and seek degrees of political and legal autonomy through peaceful achievement of more federalist treatment by the regime of its ethnic provinces. The smallest of the groups, Iman explained, seek full "south Azerbaijan" independence from Iran. These, however, are fringe groups, which he said are dangerous to the movement, as they invite the harshest regime crack-down. The main groups are "organically linked" but not systematically coordinated. "Sometimes we work together, sometimes we don't."

¶17. (C) Iman said he is not involved in the Southern Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (SANAM), a pro-independence or pro-autonomy group (observers differ over SANAM's ultimate goals) which reportedly has chapters in Azerbaijan, Turkey and the United States. Asked if his movement received help from inside Turkey, he said no. "We get no support from Turkish groups." He suggested that Iranian-Azeris living in Turkey have "a different agenda," and admitted he is suspicious of them.

¶18. (C) Iman said there is a general consensus within the movement to focus for now on cultural issues. "These are safer" and allow Iranian-Azeri activists more room to operate. Since summer 2006, the real near-term goal is to keep the movement together, functioning, and re-building. The mid-term goal is to secure more cultural and social freedoms, focusing on Azeri language and culture. Political goals should be postponed to the longer-term, he cautioned,

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and violence should never be used to secure such goals. As long as the movement's goals are modest, moderate and peaceful, he added, the movement will be able to rely on quiet support from "friends" inside the GOI. Meanwhile, his efforts to promote cultural events, disseminate cultural magazines, and start-up cultural websites, are helping create a grassroots organization and structure that eventually could become effective as a political movement.

Helping the Ahwaz, but wary of the Kurds

¶19. (C) The Iranian Azeri movement, according to Iman, is the most successful ethnic rights movement in Iran, because of its flexible structure and measured aims. "All other ethnic groups in Iran are rigid and ideological." But some, such as the Ahwaz Arabs in southwest Iran, have started to make contact with the ethnic Azeri movement, to learn how they are organized and perhaps follow their model.

¶10. (C) At the same time, there is growing friction between Iranian Azeris and Iranian Kurds, Iman warned. He said the anti-Kurdish feeling in northwest Iran was "explosive", and that the situation was very sensitive. "It is almost at a point of violence between us", though he did not identify the specific cause of the tensions. Asked if the GOI might be manipulating those tensions to keep both ethnic groups

off-balance and focused on each other rather than the regime, Iman thought probably not, characterizing the regime as "smart enough to stay out of it." A regime effort to provoke Kurdish-Azeri tensions would only lead to anti-regime backlash by both groups, he felt.

Inside vs. Outside

¶11. (C) Noting that this was the first trip he has ever taken to Turkey, Iman said he enjoys more regular travel to Canada and Europe. An Iranian-American friend has promised to help him set up a visa interview this summer at the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm, on his next trip there. (He said that posts in the region that issues visas to Iranians, including Embassy Ankara, ConGen Istanbul, and ConGen Dubai, have a reputation among many Iranians as being tougher on Iranian applicants than U.S. Embassies in Western Europe, so many are now looking to Stockholm, Paris, and elsewhere.)

¶12. (C) He acknowledged that he is in touch with several Iranian-Azeri groups in Europe, "but the real struggle is in Iran, and the real work is what we are doing in Iran." He admitted there are some tensions between the "outside" groups and the "inside" groups. Iman criticized most expatriate groups as doing very little. "They raise some funds, but that's really it." He said the most active fund-raising groups are in Germany and Sweden, though few of those activists ever try to return to Iran. He said he proceeds cautiously with them, for fear that those groups, or "their foreign sponsors" will taint his own efforts and put him at greater risk.

What does Washington want?

¶13. (S) Iman underscored that the risk of meeting with a US diplomat was outweighed by the benefit of using that contact to better understand USG views of the Azeri ethnic movement in Iran. He warned that the USG must not try to manipulate the Iranian-Azeri movement or use it only as a tool to pressure the regime. He said the movement has been betrayed in the past by Realpolitik realities, as when the Soviet Union turned in movement leaders to the Shah and even to Khomeini, after promising to support Iranian-Azeri autonomy. "Don't think of this movement as a bargaining chip." Moreover, he cautioned that "if the U.S. cuts a deal with the Iranian government, and it does not specifically protect ethnic groups' rights, the regime will think it has free rein to crush us." Iman assessed that most Iranian-Azeris believe USG support for their ethnic and cultural rights is "thin and self-serving", not genuine.

¶14. (C) Iman continued his cautionary critique, complaining that the USG does not focus its attention enough on the plight of ethnic Azeris in Iran. He claimed the Voice of America is "run by Monarchists" who only care about ethnic Persian issues and rarely report on ethnic minorities. The USG should give more genuine attention to ethnic rights in Iran, he pleaded. Statements of concerns from Washington or the UN, spotlighting the denial of Azeri rights to use their language and practice their culture, are helpful. But they

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must be carefully worded. "Such statements cannot be associated with regime change or the nuclear program. They must be statements on ethnic rights that stand alone. Otherwise the regime will paint us as foreign agents." He reiterated his primary concern -- that the real motive behind any new USG support for the ethnic Azeri movement would be to pressure the regime from within, not because of genuine human rights-related concerns for Azeris in Iran. "We would welcome more statements of support, supporting our linguistic and cultural rights, and our cultural autonomy. But nothing political, nothing too critical of Tehran."

¶15. (C) "Support for our goals from the USG is a very

delicate and sensitive issue," Iman continued, "and it is very risky right now, but it is important to us and something we want to develop in the longer-run." Iman also probed about how the USG's Iran Democracy funds work, and whether an ethnic association or NGO could be a recipient of such funds, working through a third party, for the purpose (in his case) of expanding his magazine's circulation, or building up his tourism website, or building his magazine and website staff's capacity for internet journalism.

¶16. (C) We responded to Iman's query about the USG's view of the Iranian Azeri movement by noting that it is long-standing USG policy to consider the free expression of cultural heritage as a fundamental human right; that the USG supports the aspirations of the Iranian people, regardless of ethnicity, to live in a society in which their fundamental freedoms and rights are respected; and that the USG had called in the past on the Iranian regime to release detained ethnic Azeris and other Iranian prisoners of conscience. We underscored, however, that the USG does not support ethnic groups in Iran that use violence to pursue their goals, and welcomed Iman's commitment to pursuing peaceful change. We promised to send Iman information about the Iran Democracy Fund, though the intermediary who had set up this meeting, rather than directly.

Comment

¶17. (C) Iman, though physically nervous and agitated, came across as a moderate, thoughtful interlocutor, both in his words and tone. While we cannot assess independently his credentials or standing within the Iranian-Azeri ethnic movement, and we are aware that many pan-Turkish/Azeri nationalists actively loiter on the regional human/womens/ethnic rights conference circuit, we assume that his past arrests at the hands of the GOI and his continuing efforts to publish pro-Azeri cultural materials afford him some degree of credibility as a movement activist. His cautionary plaint that the USG must not treat that ethnic movement simply as a bargaining chip in any future USG engagement with, or as a tool for further pressure on, the Iranian regime tracks closely with similar advice we have received from other Iranians, i.e., that we not allow the Iranian population's grievances and aspirations to become lost in the USG's preeminent focus on the nuclear and terrorism issues. We also found reasonable his judgment that focusing efforts for the near-term on raising awareness of Iranian-Azeri ethnic issues through cultural-focused media publications and building links with Iranian-Azeri expats through tourism are safer venues for activism for Iman personally and for this "movement" organizationally, than in pursuing a more aggressive political agenda.

¶18. (C) Unless instructed otherwise, we will forward background information on the 2008 Iran Democracy Fund and Iran "small grants" programs to Iman's intermediary/colleague, who is willing to forward it to him.
WIENER